

STORY BY RANDY ROUGHTON

# MEXICO'S FORGOTTEN WARRIORS

## THE AZTEC EAGLES FOUGHT WITH AMERICAN AIRMEN IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC DURING WORLD WAR II

**A** proud group of airmen in the South Pacific during World War II wore their Mexican pilot wings on the left breast of their uniforms and American pilot wings on the right. They called their P-47D Thunderbolt fighters "El Jarro," Spanish for "The Jug," and nicknamed themselves the "Aguilas Aztecas." While their American counterparts became part of the "Greatest Generation," Escuadrón 201 became known as the Aztec Eagles – "Mexico's Forgotten Warriors."

The squadron is still the only Mexican unit to fight on foreign

soil. Aztec Eagle pilots flew 795 sorties in almost 2,000 hours of combat. Seven pilots were killed, including five in 50 days of intense combat in the Pacific during the summer of 1945. But they were soon largely forgotten in their own country, even after Mexico dedicated a monument to them in Mexico City's Chapultepec Park in 1947.

Only 10 survivors remained of more than 300 Aztec Eagles when the National Museum of the U.S. Air Force at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio, opened an exhibit in their honor earlier this year. The Mexican air force exhibit is part of the "Airmen in a World at War"

display in the museum's Air Power Gallery.

"It's a story not well known here or in Mexico, and we're proud to be able to tell that story," said retired Maj. Gen. Charles Metcalf, museum director, during the exhibit's opening ceremony.

The Aztec Eagles returned to fanfare in their home country that was similar to the reception American servicemen received when the war ended. But soon, interest in their exploits faded from memory and few people knew about their accomplishments in either country, museum senior curator Terry Aitken said.

"They didn't receive the attention they probably deserved

because as a squadron in the 5th Air Force, in the Southwest Pacific theater of operations, they were simply overshadowed by other events elsewhere," he said. "But I think it's well that the museum, as well as the Air Force, remembers those allies who stood and fought with us. It is especially true now, as more and more of the Air Force and our visitors have Hispanic backgrounds, that we incorporate into our exhibits these overlaps of Hispanic history into our own."

Retired Mexican air force Col. Carlos Garduno explained that when World War II began, most Mexican citizens still held considerable resentment toward their northern neighbor, mostly stemming from 19th-century conflicts that resulted in the loss of land that became part of the southwestern United States. Mexicans held a strong isolationist position and wanted no part of this foreign war.

All changed, however, in May 1942 when German U-boats torpedoed Mexican oil tankers Portero de Llano and Faja de Oro in the Gulf of Mexico.

Mexican President Manuel Avila Camacho used the sinkings and the

**"We're very proud to have served with the American veterans in World War II,"** said Miguel Moreno Arreola, who fought with Mexican Fighter Squadron 201, the "Aztec Eagles," during the war.

**Mexican air force Capt. Radames Gaxiola Andrade,** third from the left, stands in front of his P-47D with his maintenance team after returning from a combat mission. Captain Andrade was assigned to the Mexican air force's Escuadrón 201. Members of the Escuadrón 201 fought alongside U.S. forces during World War II.



Photo courtesy National Museum of the U.S. Air Force



Courtesy photo





deaths of 21 Mexican citizens, as well as worldwide aggression of the Axis powers, to convince the Mexican people to join the United States and the other Allies in the war.

"Prior to that time, there was a very poor and tenuous relationship between Mexico and the United States, as well as equally strained relationships between Mexico and Great Britain and other countries," Aitken said.

"There was no reason at all in 1941 for anyone in Mexico to harbor good feelings about the United States," he said. "Mexico was very isolationist at the time, but President Camacho didn't see this as a Mexican-U.S. issue. He went to the heart of Mexican core values: nonaggression and the protection of national and human rights. Mexico joined not only the American cause, but the greater Allied cause. He felt strongly that Mexico should not only defend its territory, but participate with other nations in the defense of their territories and against aggression."

After Mexico declared war on Germany, Italy and Japan on May 28, 1942, Camacho accepted a personal invitation from President Franklin D. Roosevelt to send his country's best fighter pilots to train and fight with American forces. George S. Messersmith, the U.S. ambassador to Mexico, endorsed the proposal, and the pilots were mostly selected from the country's reserves and civilian population.

Mexican servicemembers left for Laredo, Texas, from Mexico City's Buenavista train station,

with the sounds of "despedidas," or farewells, from family and friends ringing in their ears. From Laredo, they traveled by bus to Randolph Field in San Antonio and then to military bases throughout the United States for specialized training with instructor pilots from Foster Field in Victoria, Texas.

Thirty-three pilots and more than 270 support members from Squadron 201, along with a supporting headquarters element, deployed as the Mexican expeditionary air force to the Philippine Islands in February 1945. A month later, the Squadron 201 members were attached to the U.S. 5th Air Force and the 58th Fighter Group, based at Porac, Luzon, in the Philippines.

The 58th FG provided the new unit support during its first combat missions as the *Aguilas Aztecas* were merged into combat operations. In July, when the 58th FG deployed to the newly captured island of Okinawa, Japan, Squadron 201 members assumed responsibility for their area of operations. The airmen provided close in-ground support for the advancing U.S. Army's 25th "Tropic Lightning" Division and Philippine army units on Luzon, as well as dangerous, seven-hour long-range fighter strikes against strategic Japanese targets on the

island of Formosa, now called Taiwan. During 60 missions, the squadron dropped 1,038 bombs and fired more than a million rounds of ammunition.

Representing the squadron's esprit de corps was the adoption of Panchito Pistolas as the unit mascot. The name is a shortened version of the name of the popular pistol-toting Mexican rooster character from Disney's 1944 animated film "The Three Caballeros."

After the war, Camacho presented the pilots with the "Medalla Por Servicio en el Lejano Oriente." This was a special campaign medal and the only decoration ever awarded to Mexican military members for combat outside their country's borders.

"The outstanding work made by those men demonstrated that good things can only be achieved with leadership, teamwork and sacrifice, fighting side by side and shoulder to shoulder," Lt. Col. Jose Nunez, Mexico's foreign liaison officer, said in a news article about the opening ceremony for the exhibit.

Museum visitors, from civilians to Air Force generals, consistently comment about how surprised they are to learn of the

**Replicas of uniforms worn by Mexican air force members during World War II** are part of the exhibit, "Mexican Air Force Aircrews" at the National Museum of the U.S. Air Force at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio.

**Mexican air force Escuadrón 201** pilots stand in front of an aircraft prior to a combat mission in the Philippines. Squadron members fought alongside U.S. forces during World War II.

**U.S. Air Force, Philippine army and Mexican air force members** stand near a representation of Panchito Pistoles, the mascot of the Mexican squadron, painted on a wing fragment of a Japanese aircraft. The name, Panchito Pistoles, is a shortened version of the name of an animated character who starred in the Walt Disney film "The Three Caballeros."

Aztec Eagles' place in World War II history, Aitken said. The exhibit includes examples of dress and flight uniforms worn by Mexican air force members during the war, a replica of the battle flag carried by the Mexican expeditionary air force, an original set of pilot wings and rank insignia.

Aitken believes the vision of Camacho and the accomplishments of the Aztec Eagles extend far beyond their impact on battles in the Pacific.

"I certainly appreciate what the Aztec Eagles did during World War II, but what impressed me the most was the very long-lasting legacy between our two countries and the relationships we've had with Latin American countries," Aitken said. "It's impressive to me that over a century of bad relations was turned around by some very inspired leadership by Presidents Camacho and Roosevelt. We still have disagreements, but to this day, there remains a strong degree of mutual respect."

Members of the small Mexican fighter squadron who wore the pilot wings of both countries helped set a precedent of cooperation with other nations, including their northern neighbors.